Ancient Jewish art: an archaeological perspective

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RACHEL HACHLILI, *ANCIENT JEWISH ART AND ARCHAEOLOGY IN THE LAND OF ISRAEL* (Leiden 1988). xxii + 427 pp., 109 pl. ISBN 90-04-08115-1. $110.

This paper is dedicated to the memory of Zvi Ilan, whose premature death has saddened all those interested in ancient Jewish art and architecture. To him we owe numerous articles on ancient synagogues, fruit of his many field surveys, published in the new collection *Ancient synagogues in Israel* (Tel Aviv 1991[Heb]). Together with E. Damati, he excavated the ancient synagogue at Marous [Meroth] and published the findings in *Meroth: the ancient Jewish village* (Tel Aviv 1987). His weekly newspaper articles did much to bring archaeology to the notice of a wider public.

Rachel Hachlili writes in her foreword: "as a result of the many excavations in the last decades a large body of material has come to light which now allows for a comprehensive treatment of ancient Jewish art and archaeology"(p.xxi). This leads one to expect a comprehensive survey of the material from the periods covered, the Second Temple period and late antiquity. What the book in fact provides is a series of essays on various aspects of ancient Jewish art, seen from an archaeologist's perspective and written by an expert in her field. This has both advantages and drawbacks. On the one hand, for example, we are supplied with an excellent in-depth analysis of a site of first importance in our understanding of Second Temple art, the painted Tomb at Jericho, by the excavator herself. On the other hand, the decision to concentrate on the results of recent excavations sometimes leads to surprising omissions, so that the survey of the building works of Herod the Great omits (except for a passing reference, p.21) any mention of the Tombs of the Patriarchs at Hebron (not surveyed or excavated in recent years). Similarly, we regret her decision not to make consistent use of the written sources. While the section dealing with the reconstruction of Herod's Temple makes good use of these sources, they are lacking in other places where we could have benefitted from some reference to the Talmudic material: for example, in the section on ritual baths (miqvaoth), the author could have mentioned that there is a tractate of the Mishnah (Mishnah Miqvaoth) devoted entirely to the subject and dealing in detail with the ritual regulations for building these structures. This omission is particularly unfortunate in a book written for an international audience by a Hebrew-speaking author. Indeed she seems to prefer citing all sources by secondary reference to an archaeological report, which leads to such anomalies as a reference to Eusebius (p.397) cited by a Hebrew article! An index for those sources which are quoted directly would also have been helpful.[1]

The only other book which makes any claim to deal comprehensively with the material treated by her is Yoram Tsafrir's *Eretz Israel from the destruction of the Second Temple to the Muslim conquest*, unfortunately not yet translated into English.[2] That book covers rather different ground. It starts rather later, so that the Herodian period is not covered at all. Tsafrir's volume has the advantage of being the second in a pair, the first of which is an excellent historical survey of the period. He covers all contexts of art and archaeology in the Land of Israel: pagan, Christian, and Jewish. Thus, Jewish art is seen in its total context, which is particularly important in the case of the large mixed towns of the period, where there was opportunity for cultural interchange. With such a wide canvas, Tsafrir was forced to limit his examples severely, but the book remains a useful and well-illustrated reference work (for Hebrew readers). In contrast, Dr. Hachlili, as we shall see, assembles and analyses data to create a basis for research.

Her book is divided into two parts, the Second Temple period and late antiquity. In the introduction, she defines her terms of reference and provides a brief historical sketch. For many years it has been

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1 For an example of the contribution Christian and pagan sources can make to our understanding of the synagogue in antiquity, see now S. J. D. Cohen, "Pagan and Christian evidence on the ancient synagogue," in L. I. Levine (ed.), *The synagogue in late antiquity* (Philadelphia 1987).

2 (Jerusalem, repr. 1986). For archaeological data and chronology, see now the useful handbook by H.-P. Kuhnen, *Handbuch der Archäologie: Palästina in griechisch-römischer Zeit* (München 1990).

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widely debated whether a specifically Jewish art exists at all and, if so, how far it can be defined as Jewish. She takes the broadest possible view of this question, including in her definition "art that was created specifically for the Jewish community"(p.1) and "found expression in various aspects of Jewish life: secular, sacred and funerary"(ibid). The division between secular and sacred, and particularly between sacred and funerary, is essentially a modern one, and would not have been comprehensible (nor would it be now) to a Jew from Yemen or Ethiopia; it is unclear how far we can apply it to antiquity, where the distinctions were rather between Jew and Pagan, or Jew and Christian.[3]

Herodian architecture and art

Even allowing the widest of definitions, it is unclear how far Herodian architecture, which she includes under the heading of Jewish architecture of the Second Temple period, can be seen as architecture "created specifically for the Jewish community".[4] Herod himself was not Jewish, and many of his building projects were created for pagan customs and greatly offended the Jewish population (Josephus, *AJ* 15.267 ff., specifying the theatre and amphitheatre at Jerusalem). Josephus tells us both here and in *BJ* that Herod also built pagan temples as part of his building projects in the cities of the Land of Israel (*BJ* 1.415-21: Samaria–Sebaste; Paneion; Caesarea). Naturally, she excludes these from consideration of Jewish architecture; but the necessity to exclude so essential a part of Herod's building project calls into question the whole definition of Herodian building as 'Jewish'.

The one building project of Herod's reign that can unquestionably be called Jewish is the Second Temple itself. This is presumably why she devotes so many pages to a reconstruction of it, although there are no confirmed physical remains of the building itself, only of the Temple Mount area around it. The central importance of the Temple in the Jewish consciousness up to and including the present day, as well as the possible influences on contemporary and subsequent Jewish art, can be seen as justifying this decision. It is somewhat surprising, however, that she omits from her reconstruction the well-documented vine of gold[5] over the entrance to the sanctuary which served as the Temple treasury, especially in view of the subsequent popularity of vines over the doorways of synagogues and Talmudic evidence that the vine was seen by the rabbis as an important Jewish symbol.[6] She herself rejects the view that the vine was a Jewish symbol (pp.83, 318).

Herodian art, as opposed to architecture, does have some claim to be included in the category of Jewish art; for in keeping with the strictest interpretation of the *halacha*, it is almost entirely aniconic. There are exceptions, however, and she has performed a valuable service in assembling and documenting them. As a result of this, she concludes that while official art was strictly aniconic, private art sometimes made use of figurative motifs, usually birds (p.83). It is clear from Dr. Hachlili's discussion of mosaics, both in the Second Temple period (p.66 f.) and in late antiquity (p.391 f.), that she found some problems in defining and describing the different types of geometric patterns used in them. This could be because of her use of Avi-Yonah's classification (p.393, fig.3), which has now been superceded by C. Balmelle *et al*, *Le décor géometrique de la mosaïque romaine* (Paris 1985).

Funerary art

One of the most interesting essays in the book is that on funerary customs and art. Here the author makes full use of her own experience as excavator of the cemetery at Jericho, a site which has made an important contribution to our knowledge of the Second Temple period. Using a structuralist approach, she builds on this example to go further and provide a brief but comprehensive view of funerary art, making

3 See on this E. R. Dodds, *Pagan and Christian in an age of anxiety* (Cambridge, repr. 1990), esp. ch. 4.

4 There is indeed a case to be made for Herod's fortresses having been built specifically against the Jewish community; cf. Josephus *AJ* 15.292 ff., esp. 295.

5 Josephus *AJ* 15.394-95; *BJ* 5.210; Tac. *Hist.* 5.5; Mishnah Middoth III.8.

6 See for example P. Romanoff, *Jewish symbols on ancient Jewish coins* (Philadelphia 1944) 43-45, with bibliography and Talmudic sources *ad loc.*

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use of the work of N. Avigad and particularly his book *Ancient monuments in the Kidron valley*. Published in 1954, it remains the leading work in this area (but has never been translated from Hebrew). Dr. Hachlili's survey of ossuaries is also good, and she brings out the differences of opinion between scholars on the interpretation of the decoration.

Research on synagogues

Dr. Hachlili's main contribution in this book is to the field of synagogue research. In her short essay on the vexed question of synagogues of the Second Temple period, she provides a summary of the evidence and the debate around it.[7] Unfortunately, in fig. 1 (p.85) 3 of the plans have been reversed, so that the orientation of synagogues a, b, and c is not accurate. Table 1 below fig.1 assembles the other relevant data — date, measurements, etc. To the bibliography provided in the text we can now add the collection of research papers published by the Ben Zvi Institute,[8] especially the essays on the Second Temple Period synagogues by E. Netzer and L. I. Levine.[9]

For the synagogues of late antiquity, the amount of material piled up over the last few decades is far greater, and we are greatly indebted to the author for collecting and organising this material. Her work should form the basis for future research for years to come. The section on the synagogues of Late Antiquity begins with a short introduction in which the author discusses function, carefully distinguishing the synagogue from the Temple cult. She cites (p.140-41) Avi-Yonah on synagogue inscriptions,[10] pointing out that Aramaic is far commoner than Greek. This observation is borne out by the most recent work on the subject, L. Roth-Gerson's repertoire *The Greek inscriptions from the synagogues in Eretz-Israel* (Jerusalem 1987[Hebrew]).

The chapter on synagogue architecture and decoration includes an account of the history of synagogue research. She points out that the attempt at a chronological classification by Avi-Yonah has been rejected by scholars in the light of recent evidence, so that there is no longer any generally accepted theory for the classification of synagogue architectural development.[11] The author then presents the data she has assembled, analysed, and classified by various methods. No previous work has been so comprehensive in its scope. There are four figures (pp.144-47) of ground plans of synagogues, through which we can see at a glance the common and divergent features. Figure 2, of the Golan synagogues, is a model of how to present visual evidence, with all the synagogue plans drawn to the same scale and with the same orientation. There are 4 tables which analyse and classify the details of 43 synagogues, showing such important features as date, orientation, presence of elements such as Torah shrines or floor mosaics, orders of architecture, etc. She also deals with theories of origins and development, and includes more detailed plans and new suggestions for reconstructions.[12] She assembles the visual evidence for various features — for example, over 20 depictions of the Torah shrine (figs.29-30).

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7 It should be noted that the number of 480 synagogues in Jerusalem before 70 CE, quoted by Dr. Hachlili from a Talmudic source, is explained by another source (Lamentations Rabbah II.2.4) as a *gematria*. If every letter corresponds to a number, *gemetria* "seeks sublime affinities between words and their numerical values" (Umberto Eco, *Foucault's Pendulum* [London 1990] 36). The number 480 is therefore not to be taken at face value.

8 A. Oppenheimer, A. Kasher, and U. Rappoport (edd.), *Ancient synagogues* (Hebrew with English summaries) (Jerusalem 1987).

9 A full English version of the essay by Levine is to be found in his collection of essays *The synagogue in late antiquity* (supra n. 1), under the title "The Second Temple Synagogue: the formative years."

10 Avi-Yonah, "Synagogue architecture in the late classical period," in C. Roth (ed.), *Jewish art* (rev.ed. 1971) 65-82.

11 For a total rejection of any common theory see A. Ovadiah and T. Michaeli, "Observations on the origins of the architectural plan of ancient synagogues," *JJS* 38 (1987) 234-41.

12 To Dr. Hachlili's assembly of evidence we can now add: on the apse: G. Foerster, "A basilica plan [including *apsis*] as a chronological criterion in synagogues," *Ancient synagogues* (supra n.8); on the chair of Moses: L. Y. Rahmani, "Stone synagogue chairs: their identification, use and significance," *IEJ* 40 (1990) 192 f. To her discussion of the triple portal, we can now add G. Foerster, "The art and architecture of the synagogue in its late Roman setting in Palestine," *The Synagogue in late antiquity* (supra n.1) 139-45, with an apt quotation of the

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The section on Synagogue art is no less important. Here she has provided a well-illustrated typology of synagogue lintels, divided into 8 types. She also includes an analysis of their profiles (pp.200-16). In the section on capitals, the author notes the relevant points, although we would query her contention that heart-shaped columns are an "exclusive" feature of synagogue architecture (p.217).[13]

In the short section on mosaics (covered in much greater detail in the essays on Iconography and Symbolism as well as Composition and Style), she correctly notes that, while scholars originally assumed mosaics were associated with changes in synagogue construction in the 3rd-4th c., new material has come to light which "will have to be taken into consideration in any future conceptual revisions concerning this subject"(p.222). She then proceeds to assemble this new material (p.222-23).[14]

In the section on Iconography and Symbolism, one might disagree with some of her conclusions, especially with her definition of a symbol: is the menorah, for example, a symbol, an emblem, or a motif? But again she has provided valuable data-analysis, collecting the depictions of menoroth from lamps (p.240) and from the necropolis of Beth She'arim (pp.247, 250). Five pages of analytical charts show the forms of the menoroth on synagogue mosaics (pp.242-46). The ritual objects associated with the menorah are similarly analysed (pp.258-61), and there are tables (pp.263-65) showing their distribution in the synagogue and in funerary art, with a useful comparison of the Land of Israel and the Diaspora. Material is assembled in text and figures for hanging lamps, the Ark, and the common conch decoration.

Figurative art, artists and pattern-books

She next turns to Jewish Figurative Art, a subject that has been widely discussed since the discoveries of the Beth Alpha synagogue and Dura Europos destroyed the idea that there was no representational art in early Judaism. Again, we differ with some of her conclusions. She suggests that "figurative art became possible for several reasons ... First of all, the attitude of the rabbis changed to one of greater tolerance ..." (p.286). She cites Urbach to support her contention. We would suggest that this statement needs to be qualified. The attitude of some of the rabbis became more tolerant; others stayed as antagonistic as ever in their attitude to the representational arts, as is clear from the discussion of the Talmudic sources by J. M. Baumgarten.[15] The spectrum of opinion seems to be reflected in the archaeological evidence from the buildings themselves, which vary from the synagogue at Meiron, which has no ornamentation other than geometric patterns, to the synagogue at Kazrin with its vegetable and bird motifs, to the synagogues at Capernaum and Chorazin with their mythological gorgons, erotes, etc. The mosaics of the later period show the same sort of variations, presumably reflecting the same spectrum of attitudes. The section on Motifs of Jewish Art, which ends with an illuminating passage from Midrash Exodus Rabbah, similarly shows how Talmudic sources could shed light on the use of common motifs.

Talmud regarding the possibility of confusion between synagogues and pagan temples. In this context, we would recall that the pagan temple at Kedesh (Fischer *et al.*, "The Roman temple at Kedesh, Upper Galilee: a preliminary study," *Tel Aviv* 11 [1984] 146 f.), with its triple portal, was earlier confused with a synagogue by E. Robinson, *Biblical Researches in Palestine*, 3 (London 1867) 71.

13 Heart-shaped pillars are found outside Palestine, for example in the so-called 'Palazzo delle Colonne' in Ptolemais, Cyrenaica; cf. C. H. Kraeling, *Ptolemais: city of the Libyan Pentapolis* (Chicago 1962) 65, 67, figs. 11-12. This building is dated by H. Lauter, *Die Architektur des Hellenismus* (Darmstadt 1986) 264 to the end of the 2nd c. BCE, although this is controversial. J. B. Ward-Perkins, *Roman imperial architecture* (Harmondsworth, repr. 1983) 370, sees heart-shaped pillars as "characteristic" of this building which "[exemplifies] the sophisticated late hellenistic domestic architecture from which so many elements of the decorative taste of Roman Italy and the Mediterranean provinces were more or less directly derived." Such pillars are also found in a non-Jewish context in Palestine, in the so-called 'Senate House' at Askalon, dated variously to the Herodian period or, more probably, the 2nd c.-early 3rd c., cf. P. Russel Diplock, *PEQ* 103 (1971) 13-16 and pl. 8a, with bibliography *ad loc.*

14 On mosaics see now A. Ovadiah and R. Ovadiah, *Mosaic pavements in Israel* (Roma 1987), reviewed in *JRA* 2 (1989) 317.

15 J. M. Baumgarten, "Art in the synagogue: some Talmudic views," in J. Gutmann (ed.), *The synagogue: studies in origins, archaeology and architecture* (New York 1975) 79-89.

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In the section on Composition and Style, she attempts a classification which here alone is not wholly successful — that of design schemes of mosaic floors. While we agree with her category A, which classifies together the three-part floors with zodiac design, and category B, with its vine-trellises, we find it difficult to accept category C, which has only two mosaics with rather dissimilar elements, one aniconic and the other with representations of birds. This section is followed by one on Origins and Sources of Jewish Art, based mainly on the work of Avi-Yonah; a section on Jewish and Christian Art;[16] and a section on Distinguishing Features of Jewish Art, based mainly on work already published by her.

The section on Artists and Pattern books contains summaries of recent scholarship on these subjects. Some of this is somewhat undigested. For example, in giving the hypothesis of Hestrin that artisans mentioned on mosaics could be responsible for the buildings as well, she cites Hestrin's conclusion, that the floors were the only places for inscriptions at that time, without pointing out that this conclusion is now vitiated by the finds of fresco inscriptions which she herself details on p.224. The hypothesis of the existence of pattern-books in antiquity to explain the repetition of stock motifs "in nearly identical form on works too far removed in time or space for direct imitation to be possible"[17] has long been the subject of scholarly debate.[18] She comes down firmly on the side of the pattern-books: "it may be confidently assumed that pattern books existed containing uniquely Jewish subjects" (p.393). We are less confident and would have welcomed a discussion which admitted other possibilities — surely Beth Alpha is near enough to Hammath Tiberias for Marianos and Hanina to have walked there to see the zodiac mosaic and make a direct imitation?[19] And could this earliest example of the design in the Land of Israel not have been due to a migrant craftsman? Is it necessary to create hypothetical pattern books for Jewish motifs and symbols when these could have been transmitted through the medium of small, mass-produced objects such as coins and lamps?

The book as a whole is beautifully produced, with lavish and appropriate illustrations, particularly the drawings by Adi Weichselbaum and the high quality black-and-white photographs. In a work which draws from such an enormous mass of material, she is to be congratulated that there are so few examples of a lack of coordination between plans and text.[20]

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16 On Jewish and Christian Art, see now G. C. Bottini *et al.* (edd.), *Christian archaeology in the Holy Land: essays in honour of V. C. Corbo* (Jerusalem 1990), with essays by D. Chen, G. Foerster, and Y. Tsafrir.

17 Cf. K. M. D. Dunbabin, "The victorious charioteer on mosaics and related monuments," *AJA* 86 (1982) 65, 69-70.

18 For a classic discussion see O. J. Brendel, *Prolegomena to the study of Roman art* (New Haven 1979) 179-82. For an excellent summary relating specifically to Jewish art, see J. Gutmann, "The Dura Europos synagogue paintings: the state of research," in *The synagogue in late antiquity* (supra n.1).

19 The craftsmen Marinos and Hanina also worked in Beth She'an–Scythopolis, which was connected by a Roman road to Tiberias; cf. B. Isaac, *The limits of empire: the Roman army in the east* (Oxford 1990) map 4.

20 Three examples to note (which do not detract from the overall achievement) are, first, the plan of Caesarea after Avner Raban, which refers to a "fish-market"(p.54), while the text (p.14), following Levine and Netzer (1978), refers to a "swimming pool". See now the final report of L. I. Levine and E. Netzer, *Excavations at Caesarea Maritima 1975, 1976, 1979* (Qedem 21, Jerusalem 1986) 149-177 and esp. 180-81, where the issue of fish-pond versus swimming-pool is fully discussed. The second example is the map of ancient synagogues (p.142), where Marous is misplaced — it should be east, not west of Bar`am. This same map illustrates the third problem, inconsistency in the forms of Hebrew names. This is not a new problem; it was noted sympathetically long ago by A. H. M. Jones *Cities of the eastern Roman empire*, preface. But some internal inconsistencies which might be misleading to a non-Hebrew speaker have crept in — for example, the map refers to H. Ha-`Amudim, while the text refers to `Ammudim and the tables refer to `Amudim; Beth She'arim is misspelled Beth-Sha'erim; the map refers to H. Summak, while the text refers to Summaqa.

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